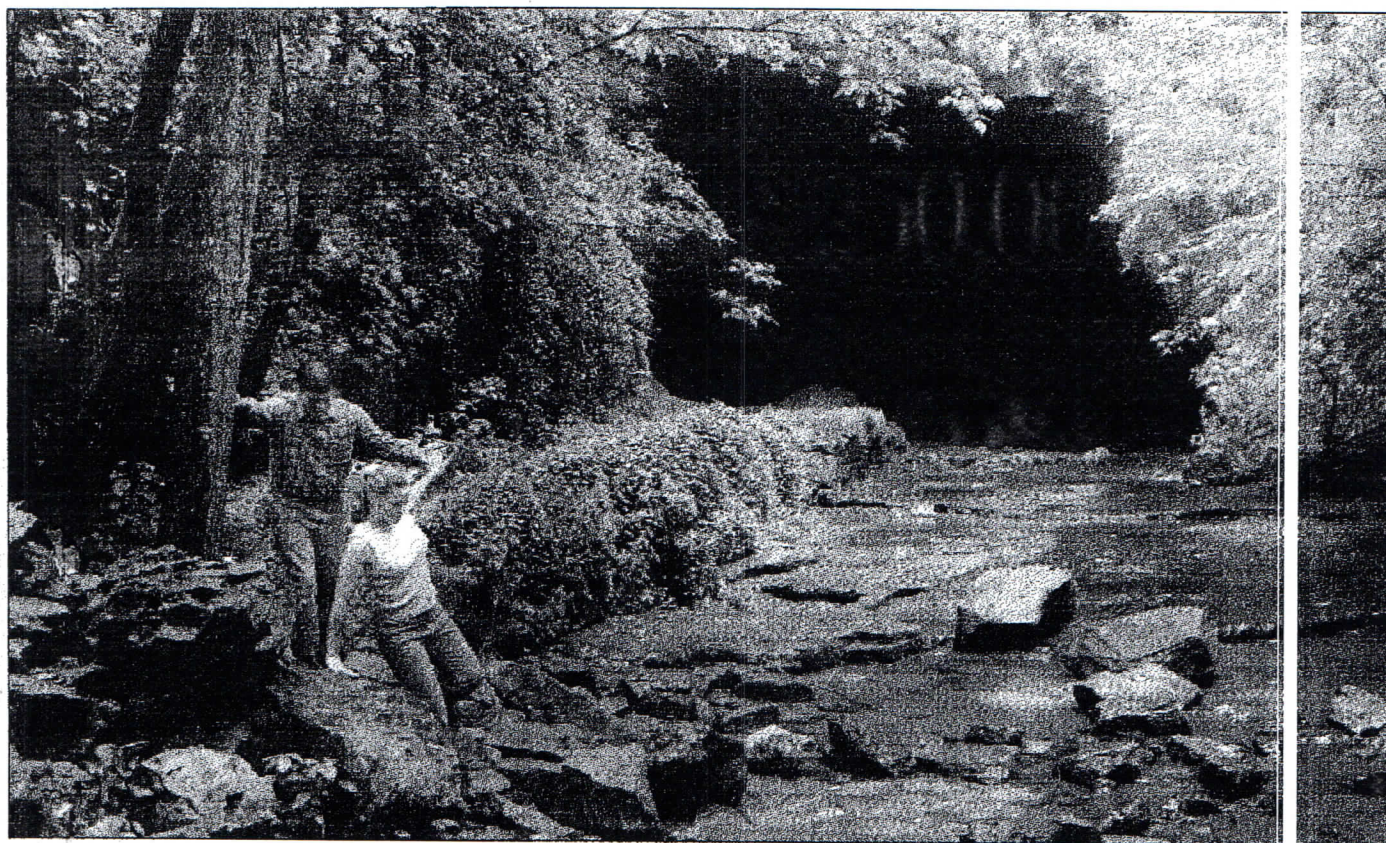


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# Sauta Cave hosts 250,000 bats



NEWS STAFF/HAL YEAGER

Rodney Corbitt, 22, and Julie Leslie, 19, leave Sauta Cave just ahead of thousands of endangered gray bats.

## State is home to largest summer roost of gray bats anywhere

By KENT FAULK  
News staff writer

SCOTTSBORO — Mosquitoes face terror nightly near Sauta Cave.

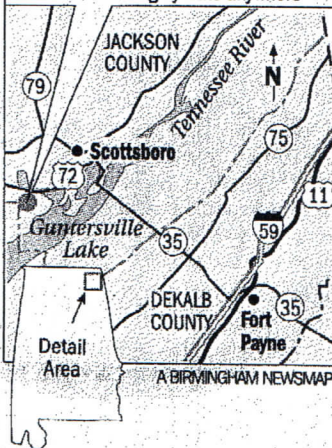
Each night during late spring and summer, a quarter of a million endangered gray bats emerge from the cave to feast on insects up and down the nearby Tennessee River.

A single gray bat can consume 3,000 mosquitoes in a night, says Keith Hudson, a state wildlife biologist. But gorging on meatier prey like mayflies and moths is preferable, he says.

"Would you rather eat one big steak or 10,000 Rice Krispies?" asks Hudson, who counts gray bats and monitors caves for the non-game program of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fish-

### Bat cave

Jackson County cave has the largest summer roost of gray bats anywhere



eries.

Sauta Cave, just off U.S. 72 west of Scottsboro, provides the largest nightly emergence of bats from a cave east of the Mississippi River, Hudson says. It's also the largest summer roost of gray bats anywhere, he says.

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*Gray bats weigh less than half an ounce and have a wing span of about 10 inches. In Sauta Cave, 180 bats per square foot hang from the ceiling.*



## BATS: 3-5 million bats live in region

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A sign from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which owns and manages the cave, proclaims the bat colony eats 1 billion insects each night.

The creatures' nightly mass exodus is an awesome sight that often draws spectators.

At dusk, the first couple of bats emerge from the cave after a good day's sleep and begin the hunt for insects. A few minutes later, dozens are trickling out, followed by hundreds. By the time the roost is fully awake, several thousand bats are flying out of the cave every minute in a fluttering crescendo broken by occasional squeaking.

"It's like a mass of stuff floating in the air," Rick Serrano of Atlanta said as he stood outside the cave Tuesday evening. "It's pretty impressive."

Serrano's sister, Sonia Burnett, brother-in-law Percy Burnett III and nephew Percy IV, who live in New Market, brought him to the cave after witnessing the exodus themselves for the first time several weeks earlier.

As the bats flocked out over them, the group walked into the mouth of the cave and looked through iron bars that keep visitors out but give bats free access. It's a \$100,000 fine or up to a year in prison for unauthorized entrance or molestation of the bats.

"They were in the back in masses, like waiting for their time to go out," Serrano said.

In fact, 180 bats per square foot hang from the 40-foot-high upper section of Sauta Cave, Hudson said.

Gray bats weigh less than half an ounce and have a wing span of about 10 inches — about medium size for a Southeastern U.S. bat. "Think of a gray bat as a mouse with wings," he said.

Not everyone sticks around to see the creatures take flight.

Rodney Corbitt of Scottsboro stopped by with his girlfriend, Julie Leslie of South Sauty, to look at the cave, but they left before the bats came out. "The bats scare me. It's the devil, I believe," Corbitt said.

Corbitt says he's been on the Tennessee River across the highway from the cave at night when the bats emerge to feed. Bats swoop down to snack on bugs crowded around boat navigation lights, he says.

Bats are misunderstood creatures, Hudson says. While a few species do drink animal blood and bats can carry rabies like any other mammal, they are beneficial, he said. Bats eat insects, and in South America are vital in pollination of tropical

rain forest plants, such as bananas, he said.

"They're not demons," Hudson said. "They're just a very interesting wildlife species and I never get tired of working with them."

Most bats don't live in caves, Hudson said. Gray bats, however, do live in large concentrations in caves. That's the main reason they've become an endangered species, he says.

"You have the potential to impact a significant percentage of a species with a single reckless act," Hudson said.

Roughly 3 million to 5 million gray bats can be found in a region that includes Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and Missouri, Hudson says. The gray bat population follows the deep limestone belt where the caves are.

Anderson Cave near Lake Purdy in Shelby County has 3,500 to 4,000 gray bats, Hudson said.

Hudson says the gray bat population has stabilized because of actions the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state and groups such as the Tennessee Valley Authority have taken to limit access to the caves.

While Sauta Cave has the largest summer roost of gray bats from April to late August or early September, a cave about eight miles away, Fern Cave, has the largest population of hibernating gray bats during the cooler months. Fern, also owned by the Fish and Wildlife Service, has even more bats than Sauta.

"If you're going to protect the gray bat, you've got to do it in Alabama," Hudson said.

Sauta used to be a maternity cave, where female bats birthed and raised their young, Hudson said. But in recent years, the population has become almost exclusively male, what Hudson calls a bachelor cave.

Gray bats are attracted to Sauta because of the built-in ventilation system that draws warm air through the upper opening of the cave and pushes cooler air out through the bottom opening in the summer. During the winter, the process is reversed, with cooler air sucked through the bottom and warmer air pushed out the top. Federal wildlife officials had named the cave Blowing Wind Cave, but it was changed back to its original name at the request of cavers, Hudson said.

An ammonia smell wafts through the air from the foot or more of guano (bat droppings) on Sauta's floor, Hudson said. The nitrate-laden guano was mined from the cave during the Civil War to make saltpeter for use in gunpowder, he says.

# LUNC